DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 347 527 CS 213 367

AUTHOR Dressel, Janice Hartwick
TITLE The Formal Oral Group Exam: Challenges and Possibilities--The Oral Exam and Critical Thinking.
PUB DATE 23 Nov 91
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (81st, Seattle, WA, November 22-27, 1991).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Critical Thinking; *English Instruction; *Group Testing; Higher Education; Learning Activities; *Student Evaluation; Thinking Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Oral Examinations; Speaking Thinking Relationship

ABSTRACT

Defining critical thinking as a conscious process means that teachers can make students aware of the process and can affect the process. In addition, teachers can help students to evaluate their use of the process. The goal in any course is to involve students in the practice of critical thinking, and the oral exam reflects the students' understanding of the content discussed in the course, their ability to operate within the gestalt developed throughout the term, to establish appropriate criteria, to generate possibilities, and to evaluate those possibilities using appropriate criteria. Much of the class time is spent considering questions such as, What is writing? What is literature? or What is language arts? Using a model suggested by Glatthorn and Baron, the oral final exam includes the following components: (1) goal; (2) redefining the goal; (3) search for possibilities; (4) search for evidence; (5) use of the evidence; and (6) concluding that the goal is reached. Examining the reactions and experiences of students to such an exam shows that depending on the particular situation, an oral exam can strengthen the learning community. Unlike other exams, the oral exam is not a solitary endeavor submitted to an "expert" for evaluation and grading. The oral experience permits students to participate in the critical thinking process while preparing for the exam, to share their knowledge with others, and to learn from their peers. (PRA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Janice Hartwick Dressel
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

PRESENTED AT NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH
Seattle 11/23/1991

ED347527

THE FORMAL ORAL GROUP EXAM: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

THE ORAL EXAM AND CRITICAL THINKING

Janice Hartwick Dressel
Central Michigan University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Critical thinking is a conscious process; the process involves comprehension, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. But the process is not linear, nor is it two-dimensional; it is, instead, multi-dimensional. Defining thinking as a conscious process, means that we can make students aware of the process, and through teaching, we can affect that process. We can also help students evaluate their use of the process.

No matter what course I teach, I focus on critical thinking because I believe that, until teachers become aware of their own thinking process, it is difficult and may be impossible for them to teach their own students to think critically. Glatthorn and Baron have described a six-step model of thinking which I find particularly helpful and which I share with my students:

1) Thinking begins with a state of doubt about what to do or believe
2) We usually have a goal in mind when the doubt arises, but we may search for new goals, sub-goals, or a reformulation of the original goal (the new insight we wish to achieve)
3) We search for possibilities - possible solutions implicit in the goal
4) We search for evidence relative to the possibilities: we search for arguments, scenarios, analogies, and facts that bear on possibilities
5) We use the evidence to revise the strengths of possibilities

CS213367

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

6) We decide the goal is reached and conclude the search

Throughout the course, I challenge students to participate in the thinking process. We spend much of our class time considering questions such as what is writing, what is literature, or what is language arts? We establish the boundaries of the construct, describe the contents, compare and contrast, argue pros and cons, construct scenarios, discuss "what if" situations. The construct is constantly developing as we consider new possibilities and compare those with criteria we have developed. This process demands a high degree of tentativeness in the learner. Many students struggle with the idea that knowledge is constructed rather than a body of factual material to be memorized. Some never become comfortable with the understanding that any particular decision must be made in light of one's goal and the particular situational context. A student last term, for example, asked: "This little girl has been writing about her Dad's barn for three weeks. Should I let her continue, or should I make her write about something else?" She wanted a fill-in-the-blank answer and was most unhappy when I couldn't provide one.

My objective in any course is not to come to any particular conclusion but to involve students in the practice of critical thinking--of clearly identifying and delineating the goal to be achieved thus generating criteria for evaluation of possible solutions, of exploring alternate ways of achieving the goal, and of subsequently evaluating the relative value of the possibilities using the appropriate criteria. The course, in itself, becomes, by analogy, the thinking process.

The oral exam reflects the students' understanding of the content we have discussed throughout the course and his or her ability to operate within the gestalt developed throughout the term, to establish appropriate criteria,

to generate possibilities, and to evaluate those possibilities using appropriate criteria. Although very few students have experience in this process, most are able to use it effectively by the end of a course; within one term, however, fewer come to the point of being able to fluently describe what they are doing as a conscious process.

I have found it helpful to use Glatthorn and Baron's model as an outline for designing the oral exam. The following final, for example, was designed for a language arts course I taught during the Spring of 1990:

Dressel
TE 317 - Final
Spring 1990

Our last assignment will take the place of the final. It will begin during our regular class session on May 31st and conclude on the night of the final, June 5th. Each person will have approximately ten (10) minutes to share something of importance with the rest of us. That "something" is to be selected from your outside readings, conference attendance, or extended writing. Be sure to explain to us how your "something" is related to the content of this course and how it relates to the schema outlined by Teale. If you are looking for topic suggestions, I am interested especially in the presentation of high quality material related to listening and speaking as well as ways to integrate the teaching of skills into a total language arts program.

Feel free to choose to discuss one article or conference session or to incorporate a number of articles and sessions. You may work alone or you may work with someone else and combine your time. I encourage you to use a format which will help you present your material in the most efficient way while also keeping your audience interested. You might consider using formats such as a slide presentation, a radio interview, an Ebert and Siskel format. . . . Whatever you choose, be sure that the format enhances your sharing of material rather than overshadowing or interfering with it.

(Continued - next page)

(continued)

In evaluating your presentation, I will consider the following:

1) selection of material to be presented: does the material you selected enhance our understanding of an integrated language arts program and its components;

2) actual content presented: does your presentation give evidence of preparation, is it clearly organized;

3) actual presentation: are you able to communicate clearly and unself-consciously with your audience, is your material presented in an interesting and audience friendly manner, are you prepared for an oral (not written) presentation;

4) effort, time, and originality: all three of these are highly valued, but just as in the classrooms in the text, activity for the sake of activity is not, so originality in relation to your material, sufficient effort to producer high quality results, and effective use (not abuse) of preparation and presentation time are important.

Using the Glatthorn and Baron model, the final might be described as follows:

1) goal: the student's goal was to explain how a concrete example (a reading, a conference session, a piece of writing) was related to the schema of "language arts" (reflected in the course in general and more specifically in "the schema outlined by Teale." This grew out of weekly assignments during which the students had summarized the chapters of their text, Stories to Grow On (Jensen, 1990) using the criteria, based on the Coalition Conference and summarized by Teale in his forward.

2) Redefining the goal: through this process, the students continually wrestled with their understanding of the concept of "language arts" in light of a specific example. As they considered idea after idea, they learned both what they knew and what they didn't know. The understanding

of the construct became personal and personalized.

3) Search for possibilities: students had to decide what to present. At first glance, it appears that they merely have to choose something they read, a conference they attended, or some aspect of their process writing. But because they needed to present this to an audience, they also had to determine what was most likely to appeal to that audience (the professor and their classmates) as well as what they felt they could present most effectively. Rather than limiting their choices, these restrictions may in fact have increased the concrete possibilities, and hence the necessity to entertain tentativeness. In my experience, unlimited possibilities often seem to eliminate effective consideration, resulting, instead, in student's making arbitrary and unconsidered decision: "I know what I'm going to do. I'll present my pet idea."

4) Search for evidence: the evidence is results from evaluating each ideas "fit" with "the content of the course" and the "schema outlined by Teale". Each presenter had to decide what aspects of the concept "language arts" were or were not sufficiently reflected in each example they considered and why. While limiting their final selection, the criteria actually seem to stimulate additional possibilities by making the evaluating criteria concrete. The evaluating criteria, when translated by each individual student, become an enabling measure permitting each individual to choose, confidently, the topic he or she feels most well-suited to his or her talents and understanding.

5) Use the evidence: after great struggle, each student selects the what he or she will discuss and how to relate that to the construct--either as it exists or as an extension of it. Either way, their presentation extends

the depth and breadth of the total class understanding.

6) Conclude that the goal is reached: When the student decides which "something" best meets the criteria, he or she prepares and presents the material to the class.

I require that students in the class help the person who is sharing. Their feedback helps the presenters determine whether they have been able to convey their message to their audience. Recently, I have encouraged presenters to devise methods to determine if the class has actually understood the intent of the presentation--and if not, to address that immediately. This helps to counteract the idea that the sharer is "putting information in", relieves the pressure on the student to become an actor, and actually mandates understanding on the part of both the sharer and the responders. Since I see this as a cooperative venture, students are rewarded for helping other presenters as well as for their own presentations.

It seems to me that one of the impediments to the usefulness of the group oral exam may be the excessive nervousness that results. This term (fall 1991), I decided to offer the oral exam as one of six options for the midterm rather than requiring it. This was the assignment:

> In class (as opposed to "take home"): working together with others who choose this, compare and contrast the video to be shown in class on 10/8/91 with Calkins' understanding of the writing process. You may design this in any way you choose; it is to be presented in class on 10/15/91.

Four students chose this option. After seeing the video, they were frantic. On the surface, the film is a perfect example of the writing process. The

narrator of the video uses terminology which sounds as though it comes right out of Calkins. In fact, he presents the theory flawlessly. The students were stymied and angry. I listened as they expressed their frustration about the situation; then, I suggested that, since they had chosen this option and thus had to complete the midterm, they should proceed to do the comparison even if they found no differences. I suggested they begin by listing concepts and ideas which are important to Calkins; I also mentioned one difference I noted and described how it challenged Calkins' understanding. They decided to borrow the video, watch it again, and see what they could do. Still panicky, they made me promise to be available if they had any questions; I gave them my home number. They called me at home to be sure they were on the right track; they called at the office to ask if I wanted an outline before the presentation.

During their presentation, they discussed each of these concepts:

mini-lessons	ownership
conferencing	product over process
leading questions	learning and regression
role of the teacher	importance of feelings
invented spelling	listening
empty praise	teacher as student
author's chair	relax about skills
control	peer conferencing
keeping track of progress	limiting topics
topic selection	errors as windows to thinking

They distributed handouts: one was a list of helpful hints for conferencing, another was a point by point comparison of Calkins with the

content of the video, a third was a form for record-keeping.

The most revealing of all, however, was the role play they devised to introduce their presentation. The role play had two parts: the first was a conference as it appeared in the video, the second was a conference as Calkins suggests it be conducted. The content was a outstanding parody of the video, a perfect description of Calkins. They called the drama their mini-lesson; this in itself revealed an in-depth understanding of the writing process as Calkins sees it.

The group oral exam has also worked quite effectively for me in literature. In a course on young adult literature, I worked with the students to develop an understanding of what "literary quality" means, in both its affective and cognitive dimensions. We discuss relative meanings of the term "good book"; we discuss affective response, the purpose and effects of analysis, genres, character, setting, plot, theme, mood, and style; we compare and contrast these elements in books they are reading; we read what "authorities" have to say; we discuss censorship. They read thirty books over the course of the term, both picture books and novels. At the end of the term, they submit their complete bibliography and, for their final, I select two books for them to discuss. These are the instructions for the exam:

(see figure - next page)

Dressel
Eng 580
Final

How do your two books compare in literary quality? Explain your answer as fully as you can. Each person has only five minutes to speak, so think carefully and make notes if you wish. We look forward to your evaluation!

Christine: Mr. & Mr. Bo Jo Jones and Summer of Fear
Dee: Dogsong and The Face on the Milk Carton
Deanna E.: Sweet Whisper, Brother Rush and Midnight Hour Encores
Lynda: The Abduction and Manwolf
Kari: Solitary Blue and The Root Cellar
Jenny: One-Eyed Cat and The Fledgling
Tammy: Celine and Children of the Dust
Jeanine: "Night, Mother" and In the Keep of Time
Nancy: I Heard the Owl Call My Name and To Kill a Mockingbird
Marilee: A Little Love and Native Son
Ami: Jacob Have I Loved and Beauty
Ali: The Chocolate War and Goodnight, Mr. Tom
Steve: Izzy, Willy Nilly and Beyond the Divide
Lori: Roll of Thunder and What I Really Think of You
Deanna S.: The Gathering of Days and Love is Like Peanuts
Turina: Lord of the Flies and Close Enough to Touch

Students design their comparison in any way they choose. Based on the content of the course and the constructs discussed, they decide how to describe the literary quality of the particular books they read in light of the literary criteria discussed throughout the course, their response to the individual books, and their audience.

My experience with the oral exam has been quite positive. Unlike other exams, is not a solitary endeavor submitted to an "expert" for evaluation and grading. Depending on the particular situation, it strengthen the learning community (although it does not automatically do so). The oral experience

permits students to participate in the critical thinking process while preparing for the exam, to share their knowledge with others, and to learn from their peers.

Works Cited

Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking. Edited by Arthur Costa. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1985.